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Celebrity and the media

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Abstract

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of a survey of stories dealing with celebrities in a sample of newspapers, magazines, and television programming. Aimed at testing anecdotal accounts of an increase in the volume of such material within the media generally, the survey provides detailed evidence for the view that this now constitutes a significant portion of media output. The paper discusses these findings in the context of attempting to better understand the cultural function of such stories for their audience.

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It has become a commonplace of contemporary criticism of the news media to deplore the amount and intensity of attention given to the personal lives of celebrities. Franklin's *Newszak & News Media*, for instance, laments the triumph of 'the trivial over the weighty', as 'the intimate relationships of celebrities from soap operas, the world of sport or the royal family are judged more "newsworthy" than the reporting of significant issues and events of international consequence' (p. 4). Coverage of celebrities within news and current affairs is widely cited as evidence of a decline in 'hard' news values and the ascendancy of infotainment. Most of such evidence is anecdotal. Certainly, in Australia, we are unaware of any recent research that has set out to ascertain precisely how substantial a role celebrity stories actually play within news and current affairs journalism. Such research is worth pursuing for at least two reasons. First, it is time these criticisms were tested against empirical evidence of the proportion of celebrity stories appearing in the media; second, if celebrity stories do occur frequently enough to constitute a significant proportion of the culture's media diet, there is every reason to

ask what function such stories might be performing for their readers and viewers.

In what follows, we set out the results of a survey we conducted in 1997 that tabulated the number of celebrity stories in selected newspapers, magazines, and television programs over a sample period. The results demonstrate that there is indeed a substantial amount of media output devoted to such stories. Rather than responding to such a finding in the way that Franklin has done, with an angry critique of declining news values and the spread of infotainment, we have chosen to attempt to improve our understanding of the point of these stories for their audiences. Although this represents the beginning of a large research project that will also investigate the production of media celebrity at the point of origin—the processes and practices of promotion and publicity, for instance—we conclude this paper with some speculation into the cultural function of media stories about celebrities.

The concept of celebrity is itself a little slippery, partly because its constitutive discourses have leaked into such a wide range of media formats and practices. A high degree of personalisation is used routinely within media reports as means of producing drama. For example, it crept into some reports of Justice Murray Wilcox's delivery of the Federal Court's judgement against Patrick's appeal during the waterfront dispute in April, 1998, even though that performance was so tediously professional that it convinced all the television networks who crossed to it 'live' eventually to drop out (clumsily and precipitously in most cases) and return to normal programs. Further, given that news necessarily individuates its subjects, foregrounding the major players in all kinds of stories, it can be difficult to satisfactorily determine what is a celebrity story and what is not. Alberoni argues that 'stars' (as he calls them) are especially remarkable not because they possess a particular level of political, economic, or religious power, but because their 'doings and ways of life arouse considerable interest' (1972, p. 75). While they enjoy some of the privileges of an elite, the relative passivity such a relation proposes makes them a 'powerless elite'. Langer contests this analysis by pointing out that celebrity has increased as a focus of the mass media to such an extent that even the treatment of those who *do* possess institutional power is inflected by the construction of elites, 'political or otherwise, as especially remarkable simply by featuring them in terms of their 'doings and ways of life' (1998, p. 45). That is, Langer suggests, as does Marshall in *Celebrity and Power* (1997), that celebrity does not exist as a property of specific individuals; rather, it is constituted discursively by the way in which individuals are represented. Through what Langer, after Monaco,

calls a 'calculus of celebrityhood', celebrity is constructed rather than imminent:

> A calculus of celebrity is relatively flexible and can be operationalised 'down' as well as 'up', in the direction of those who have neither power in an institutional sense nor any kind of elite standing as celebrities but who, through specific personal achievements—their doings rather than their way of life—gain an appearance in the news, and concomitantly considerable albeit fleeting public attention. (p. 46)

Among the attributes of the system, or 'calculus', that produces celebrity is the dissolving of the boundary between public and private lives. A key marker of celebrity treatment is visible when someone who has been newsworthy because of, for instance, the part they play in the public domain—they may be contestants in a legal case, say, or victims of a natural disaster—also attracts interest in their private lives. What the discourses of celebrity emphasise is the presentation of an individuated self in the public sphere that specifically goes beyond their primary public activities into the personal and private in order to elaborate what Dyer (1979) has called 'the authentic self'. While the effect of such treatment may be unpleasant and destructive in many instances, it also carries some benefits for its objects. Far from constituting membership of a 'powerless elite', celebrityhood is a means of signifying and establishing success in a wide variety of domains—business, sport, entertainment, the arts, and so on. Celebrity status 'confers on the person a certain discursive power within the society, the celebrity is a voice above others, a voice that is channelled into the media system as being legitimately significant' (Marshall, 1997, p. x). Such people appear to be a natural topic for news. What Langer calls their 'very-being-as-they-are' becomes a readily available source of occurrences that require only the slightest 'twitch' (the excitation of mild surprise, as in the headline 'Melanie Griffith's cosmetic surgery shock!') to generate news stories (p. 59).

The nature of public interest in the celebrity is, of course, highly contradictory. As signs of the potential for ordinary people to transcend their condition, they are inspirational; as signs of the inauthenticity and superficiality of success, they are consoling. The legitimacy of celebrity is always radically provisional. As Marshall says, while celebrityhood can represent success and achievement in the social world, it can also be ridiculed and derided 'because it represents the centre of false value. The success expressed in the celebrity...is seen as success without the requisite associaton with work' (p. ix). Even when they are engaged in activities that patently are 'work', such as promoting their new record, film,

or stage production, the actual representation of celebrities' behaviour will often deliberately elide any contextualisation that might foreground what they are doing as promotion. So, a celebrity will 'meet with reporters' in a leisure location like the golf course, or at a resort (Langer, 1997, p. 55).

Contradictory and tainted with inauthenticity as they might be, it seems clear that celebrities perform a significant function for media consumers. Langer argues that examination of the discourses used to represent celebrity can teach us a great deal about how 'values and attitudes are assembled and disseminated at particular historical conjunctures' (p. 51). Echoing Dyer's argument that the 'star' represents the 'type of the individual' within their culture, Langer suggests that 'the celebrity can stand as a spectacular representational version of aspects of primary-lived realities and "structures of feeling" and can operate as a site from which key ideological themes can be reiterated and played out' (p. 51). Marshall, too, sees the celebrity as tightly articulated with the value systems of democratic capitalism, 'wedding...consumer culture with democratic aspirations', while participating in 'the active construction of identity in the social world' (p. xi).

In the survey we conducted for this project, we set out to count the number of stories dealing with celebrities carried by the target media outlets. In most cases, this meant dealing with high profile public individuals whose celebrity was well known and whose role as a public figure was almost routinely embellished or backgrounded by the stories concerned. In other cases, it involved acknowledging that a certain transformation had occurred: where a person whose particular public office or business activity made them newsworthy was also treated in such a way as to focus on their private life. Our noting of such stories has implicitly refused to distinguish in terms of the magnitude of the celebrity of an individual at this stage, and so we capture many stories that produce celebrity-like features on previously unknown personalities as well as regular reports on the private and public movements of well known people. Occasionally, this involved difficult judgements. The task of distinguishing between a celebrity story and a review of a film, stage performance, or recording, in some cases has proved to be too complicated to perform consistently at all, however, so our sample does not include any of these forms.

The survey was conducted over two weeks in each of February and July of 1997. Newspapers monitored for celebrity stories were the *Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Australian*, *The Courier-Mail*, and *The Herald Sun*. We counted the number of stories that dealt with celebrities in each

paper on each day. The resources required to calculate a percentage figure that placed the celebrity story in the context of the total content of the paper were beyond the scale of this project. The data we have gathered, however, certainly establish that there was a substantial number of stories of this kind. The selection of sample magazines was made before the recent development of middle market men's magazines such as *Ralph* and *Max* and hence it is skewed towards women's magazines, the major commercial group then as now. Magazines surveyed were *Dolly, Cleo, New Idea, Woman's Day, The Australian Women's Weekly, TV Week, Who Weekly, New Weekly, Time Australia,* and *The Bulletin.* Given the slightly less daunting task of tabulating stories in terms of the number of pages in the magazines, rather than column inches as in the newspapers, we have produced a raw count of stories, pages, and a percentage figure that expresses the number of celebrity stories as a percentage of the total content of the magazine sample.

With television, three kinds of programming were monitored. The evening news bulletins on all free-to-air channels were monitored and the results expressed as the percentage of the total program time (less advertisements) given over to celebrity stories. In current affairs, the programs monitored were *Extra, A Current Affair, Today Tonight, The 7.30 Report, Sunday, Insight,* and *Sixty Minutes.* Again, as with television news, the results are expressed as the percentage of total program time (less advertisements) given over to celebrity stories. The third program format was the hybrid daytime talk and variety shows represented by *Today, The Midday Show,* and *Good Morning Australia.* Again, results were expressed as percentages of the total program content. Despite the attractions of the idea of monitoring talkback radio, the extensiveness of that task ruled it out for this project. Given the differences in the manner of expressing the results between newspapers, magazines, and television, cross-media comparisons from this data would not be appropriate.

What did we find? The total number of stories dealing with celebrities over this period through these media outlets is 3140 (see Table 1). The majority of these were international celebrities (1717), although the combination of Australian celebrities with those who have both international and national affiliations (Mel Gibson, for example) accounted for 1275 stories altogether. By far the most popular source of celebrities, unsurprisingly, was the entertainment industry (1730 stories), with sport a distant second (488). Most surprising was the low score for royalty (90 stories), wedged on the league table between 'ordinary citizens' (93) and business (69) (see Table 2).

Table 1 (Gross numbers by medium)

	February	July	Total
TV			
Day TV	164	153	
Current Affairs	34	38	
News	143	137	
TV Total:	341	328	669
Newspapers			
The Herald-Sun	326	361	
The Courier-Mail	204	256	
The Australian	134	175	
The Sydney M-H	183	193	
Newspaper Total:	847	985	1832
Magazines			
Entertainment	141	158	
Women's	125	156	
News	30	29	
Magazine Total:	296	343	639
		Total:	3140

Table 2 (Origin of celebrities)

Geography	Count
Local	90
National	813
International	1717
National-International	462
Multiple	58
Field of original activity	
Entertainment	1730
Sport	488
Politicians	266
Relationship (to a celeb)	140
Serious arts	105
Ordinary	93
Royalty	90
Business	69
Law	64
Journalists	47
Science/Technology	28
Health/Medicine	16
Various	4
Total:	3140

To look at specific media in turn, the treatment of celebrity in the daily metropolitan press is highly variable, but seems to reflect news values in much the way one would expect from other news categories. The results do suggest that some specific determinants are in operation, though; we can detect the influence of such things as the weekly entertainment supplements or high profile news events involving individual celebrities or individuals who become celebrities (such as the death of Versace or the rescue of Stuart Diver). The key factor to note is the difference between the numbers generated by the two 'mass-market' papers, *The Courier-Mail* (a total of 460 stories) and *The Herald Sun* (a total of 687), with a much greater interest in celebrity stories than more upmarket *The Australian* (308) or *The Sydney Morning Herald* (376). Story counts per day in the February sample ranged from a high of 42 for *The Herald-Sun* to a low of 4 for *The Australian* (see Table 3). As a means of placing these figures in some kind of comparative context, a sample Monday edition of *The Sydney Morning Herald* from 1977 recorded 6 celebrity items (none of them Australian). The Monday editions in our February survey scored 12 and 19. Similarly, with a Saturday edition from 1977, the story count was 6 (one of them Australian) as against the contemporary scores from the February sample of 16 and 33. This strongly implies a dramatic increase in the number of stories devoted to celebrities in the daily press as well as suggesting a significant increase in the proportion of stories devoted to Australian celebrities.

Table 3

	Mon 10/2	Tue 11/2	Wed 12/2	Thu 13/2	Fri 14/2	Sat 15/2	Sun 16/2	Mon 17/2	Tue 18/2	Wed 19/2	Thu 20/2	Fri 21/2	Sat 22/2	Sun 23/2
SM-H	12	12	15	12	20	16	-	19	9	14	16	6	33	-
C-M	8	16	11	29	9	21	M	10	7	8	28	8	11	38
Australian	5	14	12	10	5	18	-	4	17	6	11	9	23	-
H-S	12	21	34	42	20	15	19	21	20	25	25	13	22	36

	Mon 14/7	Tue 15/7	Wed 16/7	Thu 17/7	Fri 18/7	Sat 19/7	Sun 20/7	Mon 21/7	Tue 22/7	Wed 23/7	Thu 24/7	Fri 25/7	Sat 26/7	Sun 27/7
SM-H	10	9	14	17	20	33	-	18	10	7	9	19	27	-
C-M	7	13	15	29	10	14	43	10	9	13	28	8	14	43
Australian	7	15	18	12	6	22	-	9	23	11	9	21	22	-
H-S	13	18	36	31	M	36	31	16	19	34	32	18	43	35

The magazine sample substantiated the commonly held view that celebrity stories have become a highly significant component of the successful women's magazine in the Australian market. With the curious exception of *Cleo*, which printed the smallest percentage of celebrity stories of the whole sample (possibly displaced by its focus on sex), the women's magazines devoted between 25% and 32% of their content to this material. *New Idea*, arguably the most 'tabloid' of the women's magazines, scored the highest average (32%), although *Woman's Day* scored the highest percentage of celebrity stories in a single issue (38%). Comparison with sample issues of *The Australian Women's Weekly* from 1977 reveals a dramatic change in the amount of celebrity material, and in the number of Australian celebrities dealt with in its pages. Whereas the 1997 survey had celebrity stories in *The Australian Women's Weekly* accounting for an average of 26% of the content of the magazine, the 1977 issues averaged 6.8%. The number of pages devoted to celebrities was 48 and 68.7 in 1997 and 11 and 9.33 in 1977. Of the celebrities dealt with in the 1977 issues, only two were Australian.

Predictably, celebrity stories are fundamental to the entertainment and gossip magazines, accounting for an average 46% of their content. They are most suited to that part of celebrity coverage that displays the 'authentic' person who exists behind the performance, and the least influenced by conventional news values. Less predictable was the high proporton of news magazine content devoted to celebrity; at almost double the percentage of television news, the average score of 18% suggests that celebrity has become a substantial item within magazines normally assumed to be among the more committed defenders of hard news values. While their figures fluctuate dramatically from issue to issue (from 4% to 34% for *Time Australia*), this is clearly a product of their news values; their content is highly 'event-driven', and in the period surveyed celebrity news events included the murder of Versace and the O.J.Simpson verdict. Nevertheless, the news magazines produced a higher proportion of celebrity stories than expected. The only other notable feature to highlight in relation to magazines is simply the volume of material pumped out by the entertainment magazines, with *Who Weekly* regularly publishing around 100 celebrity stories an issue and *New Weekly* scoring a consistent 92 every week. The supply required to satisfy that level of demand is something that subsequent stages of this research project will address.

Television news is increasingly regarded as being in the thrall of infotainment, and this is substantiated by the proportion of celebrity stories in news bulletins (see Table 5). The highest score in the February survey

Table 4 (Magazines: Percentage of celebrity content)

JOURNAL	Issue	Total number of pages	Number of celeb pages	Number of celeb stories	Percent celeb pages	Sample average
Women's						
Women's Weekly	Mar-97	258	48	20	22%	
	Sep-97	308	68.7	32	29%	26%
Dolly	Apr-97	132	38.3	16	29%	
	Sep-97	132	27.1	19	21%	25%
Cleo	Mar-97	156	16	12	10%	
	Aug-97	160	19	15	12%	11%
New Idea	15-Feb	96	28.8	19	30%	
	22-Feb	96	35.8	22	37%	
	19-Jul	96	28.4	20	30%	
	26-Jul	96	30.4	21	32%	32%
Woman's Day	17-Feb	104	24.5	19	24%	
	24-Feb	104	27.7	20	27%	
	21-Jul	104	39.7	21	38%	
	28-Jul	104	27.9	26	27%	29%
Entertainment						
TV Week	15-Feb	80	37.4	32	47%	
	22-Feb	80	34.2	32	43%	
	18-Jul	80	46.7	27	58%	
	26-Jul	80	31	28	39%	47%
Who Weekly	17-Feb	104	40.6	24	39%	
	24-Feb	98	41.3	19	42%	
	21-Jul	100	39.4	16	39%	
	28-Jul	100	39.2	18	39%	40%
New Weekly	24-Feb	92	54.8	35	60%	
	21-Jul	92	45.7	38	50%	
	28-Jul	92	45.2	30	49%	53%
News						
Time Australia	17-Feb	84	28.7	14	34%	
	24-Feb	88	3.1	3	4%	
	21-Jul	72	22.4	5	31%	
	28-Jul	124	2.7	10	2%	18%
Bulletin	18-Feb	84	18.5	8	22%	
	25-Feb	84	11	5	13%	
	22-Jul	84	12.5	6	15%	
	29-Jul	84	18	8	21%	18%

Table 4a

Magazines: Average percentages (by type)	
News	18%
Entertainment	46%
Women's	24%

is from SBS (14.3%), perhaps surprisingly, but this is a consequence of our decision to treat at least some of the coverage of the death of Deng Xiao Ping as a celebrity story. If we had not done that, the SBS score for February would have been 9.2%, close to the average for television news of 9%. This is a substantial proportion of program content, and there is evidence to suggest it constitutes a dramatic increase. Bell, Boehringer, and Crofts (1982) found that the average proportion of news bulletins devoted to celebrity stories over a five week period in 1980 was 3.2% (pp. 21-24). In surveys of television news conducted in 1978 and 1983, Gerdes and Charlier (1983) used a 'General Interest' category that, while slightly more extensive, included the kind of items our survey counted as celebrity stories. According to Gerdes and Charlier, the average percentage of news bulletins devoted to General Interests in 1978 was 3.2% and in 1983 4.2%. Since this category also included 'animals, kids, babies, health and odd records', the actual number of stories that would have been about celebrities was probably a little lower than the figures suggest (pp. 40-45). They are, however, roughly consistent with the figures generated by Henningham's survey of television news from 1986, where he found that the percentage of stories dealing with his category of Famous People across all channels was 3.7%. As was the case with our sample survey of the press in 1977, Henningmham found the overwhelming majority of Famous People were 'foreigners'; Australian celebrities made up only 0.6% of the total sample (1988, p. 165).

Table 5 (News)

	Station	Averages
February		
	7	8.0
	9	9.0
	10	12.9
	SBS	14.3
	ABC	8.5
July		
	7	8.2
	9	11.1
	10	9.7
	SBS	9.3
	ABC	6.9

In television current affairs, the results reveal wide variations between the programs, with average proportions of celebrity stories ranging from a low of 2.1% (*Extra*, February) and 1.9% (*The 7.30 Report*, July), and a high of 30.5% (*Sixty Minutes*, February) and 56.5% (*Sixty Minutes*, July) (see Table 6). Apart from the high scores of *Sixty Minutes* in both survey periods, which demonstrates the importance of celebrity stories to its format, there is little consistency in these results and no evidence upon which to base the argument that current affairs in general, or a specific program in particular, was dependent upon celebrity stories. Certainly, it is hard to argue that the proportion of current affairs television devoted to celebrities has increased dramatically over recent years. Bell, Boehringer, and Crofts provide figures for *Willesee at 7* from 1980 that have the program scoring 18% for those weeks that coincided with the election campaign and a massive 58.9% for the post election week (p. 15). The authors suggest that the celebrity stories were displaced by the 'political stars' during the pre-election period: 'indeed, the combined percentage of the Federal Election and Celebrities [categories] during the pre-election week was roughly equal to the percentage of celebrities and personalities during the sample [post-election] week' (p. 56). According to Bell et al., consumer stories and celebrity interviews were the primary genres of the program so the current formation of *A Current Affair* (also produced by Willessee's company) probably provides a more varied and traditional coverage of hard news than its forerunner. Nevertheless, Bell et al.'s description of the approach taken in consumer affairs suggests that in this area at least little has changed over the last two decades: '[*Willesee at 7*] was perhaps most notable for its self-congratulatory highlighting of consumer advocacy and investigative journalism on behalf of "ordinary" people exploited by greedy businessmen or suffering at the hands of bureaucratic intransigence and bungling' (p. 48). This could also describe the work of Mike Munro on *ACA*.

Bell et al. provide some figures for *Sixty Minutes* that suggest that it has increased its use of celebrity stories. Over the four weeks surveyed in 1980, *Sixty Minutes* scored 25.8% celebrity content (pp. 74-5). Interestingly, it dealt with roughly three times as many foreign celebrities as locals, suggesting that the increase in local celebrities noted more generally may be one of the factors responsible for the increased proportion of celebrity stories in the current sample.

Finally, daytime TV. As was the case with magazines, it should come as no surprise to find how heavily dependent these programs are upon celebrity material; they are the preferred site for celebrity exposure

outside prime time (See Table 7). All recorded consistent scores over the two survey periods: *Today* scoring 17.9 and 14.9, *Midday* scoring 40.8 and 43.6, and *Good Morning Australia* scoring 30.9 and 26.7. Rather than reflecting the news values operating at the time, this reflects producers' decisions about the programs' format: the precise mix of news, personalities, performances, and consumer information that the programs' producers regard as appropriate for their audience.

Table 6 (Current Affairs)

	Program	Averages
February		
	Extra	2.1
	ACA	17.8
	T-T	18.4
	7:30	15.1
	Sunday	13
	Insight	34
	60 Mins.	30.5
July		
	Extra	7.2
	ACA	4.6
	T-T	8.8
	7:30	1.9
	Sunday	36
	Insight	M
	60 Mins.	56.5

Table 7 (Day TV)

	Program	Averages
February		
	Today Show	17.9
	Midday Show	40.8
	GMA	30.9
July		
	Today Show	14.9
	Midday Show	43.6
	GMA	26.7

Celebrity stories are pervasive in the media forms surveyed. On the evidence so far, we can demonstrate that their presence has increased significantly in the daily press, women's magazines, and television news. They are fundamental to the formats of the new generation of entertainment magazines represented by *Who Weekly* and *New Weekly*, and to daytime television talk shows such as *Midday*. Across the media forms, it is evident that editors and producers recognise and cater for their audiences' interest in celebrity moments as well as regular celebrity-oriented features and columns. Such an interest requires a system to serve it, agencies that channel internationally derived celebrity stories into national media outlets as well as Australian derived celebrity stories designed for local consumption. The growth in the production of Australian celebrities for media consumption over the last two decades is probably even more substantial and dramatic than the increase in the proportion of celebrity stories. Where Australian celebrities were once virtually invisible, they now contribute more than a third of the total number of celebrity items in our survey. The next stage of this research project will investigate the historical emergence of an Australian 'celebrity industry', the expansion in the field of publicists and promotional agencies that service it, and their relationship with the media outlets themselves.

Before concluding, however, it is worth thinking a little about the appeal of the celebrity story for its audiences across media forms and taste cultures. According to Connell, the display of celebrities through the popular media satisfies the 'oppositional resentment' of the popular audience (1992, p. 66). Excluded from the good life the celebrity is displayed enjoying, the audience reaction to such stories can be highly contradictory. On the one hand, the success of celebrities who claim no special entitlement to their privileged position can appear to be especially valorised for maintaining their intrinsic 'ordinariness' and disavowing their elite status. On the other hand, the success of such celebrities 'encourage[s] and nourish[es] scepticism about the legitimacy of the [...] personalities to act as they do' (p. 82). Connell argues that the thirst for stories about celebrities is fuelled by a vision of celebrities as 'members of a privileged caste' (p. 78) against which the typically cheeky and iconoclastic stories of the tabloid press mount 'a populist challenge' (p. 74).

There are more positive accounts, however, that see such stories serving a politics quite different from that of a reactionary populism. Langer argues that celebrity stories serve a democratic ethic as well as indicat-

ing the importance of the media in legitimating definitions of success:

> Reports on ordinary people...help to cultivate this impression—that becoming celebrated is a state of affairs virtually accessible to everyone. Indeed, some have suggested that the traditional version of mobility and success in an 'open society', once so closely associated and measured within terms that might have been economic or social, is now increasingly implicated in and ratified by publicity. (p. 46)

Marshall provides a similar view, although more equivocally put, when he suggests that the framing of the celebrity as a marketable commodity 'serves as a powerful type of legitimation of the political economic model of exchange and value—the basis of capitalism—and extends that model to include the individual' (p. x).

It is the celebrity's complex entanglement within, and contribution to the augmentation of, the discursive structures of their society that dominates most contemporary accounts of the cultural function of the celebrity. Far from operating merely as a focus for the resentment of the dispossessed as Connell's account implies (and in his defence, his interest is primarily in explaining the specific form of celebrity story identified with the tabloid press in Britain, a much more plausible location for his argument than the general), it has become relatively conventional now to talk of the celebrity as embodying central conceptions of selfhood and identity within their cultures. As Marshall says, 'celebrity status operates at the very centre of the culture as it resonates with conceptions of individuality that are the ideological ground of Western culture' (p. x). As a result, it is possible to relate the development of the celebrity as a discursive formation to 'the ways of making sense of the world current within the culture' (p. 51). A clue to how that might work can be found in Sparks's (1992) discussion of the British tabloid press, where he acknowledges the importance accorded to individual experiences within the press, even as a means for understanding large, complicated and structural, social change (such as we found, for instance, in the treatment of the death of Deng Xiao Peng). As he says, this is a problem, that the focussing on the 'experiences of the individual as the direct and unmediated key to the understanding of the social totality' has become a common, deeply embedded, feature of 'social-democratic popular journalism' (p. 42). Indeed, it may well be that the more dramatic, rapid, and disruptive the rhythm of social change, the greater the recourse to the personal, the domestic, the melodramatic, and the sensational as a means of explanation. Gripsrud's (1992) analysis of the

use of melodrama in popular journalism comes to that conclusion, quoting Elsaesser's observation that 'popular culture has resolutely refused to understand social change in other than private contexts and emotional terms' (p. 92).

Whatever the ultimate explanatory power of these arguments, they do have the benefit of moving the discussion of the reproduction of celebrity through the media out of its currently restrictive frame of reference—that of news values, ethics, or media fashion. Instead, it shifts the focus of enquiry towards the changing cultural functions performed by the media. As a number of theorists are suggesting now (see Hartley 1996 and Turner 1999), the interest in celebrities may be another symptom of the media's gradual disarticulation from a model of media practice that foregrounds the dissemination of information, and its increasing alignment with a model that more directly participates in the process of disseminating, interrogating, and constructing identities.

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